

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

SPEAKER SERIES

Whales and how to know them: Cetology's retreat from the ocean and an ethnographic response

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Marine biology is increasingly dominated by technologies that appear to reduce the need for scientists to spend time in the field with whales, or with raw data collected from whales, in order to learn about them. Yet, as I argue, the “slow science” (Stengers 2011) and sparse data that were once cetologists’ only option in fact had a great deal to offer—specifically, qualitative knowledge about whales and who they are (not just *what* or *how* they are), combined with a powerful sense of the fundamental incompleteness of human knowledge about them. In this talk, I attempt to mark this shift in scientific practice, and reflect on its consequences; while proposing an ethnography not only of science or of human-nonhuman relations, but *of* nonhumans, in this case whales. Using examples from my own ethnographic fieldwork, I show how ethnographic research with animals and those who know them intimately (in my case, with whales and whale scientists and naturalists) can yield new knowledge about those animals: knowledge about who they are, now; and how they might adapt to change, in a time when everything is rapidly changing.

Friday, October 17th, 2025
2:30 p.m. in McCain, #1116
All Welcome!